



The Power of a Signature:
Making the Watch Qualification System (WQS) Work!

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Given advances in today's underway qualification procedures, a person's signature remains significant to the validity of the qualification process. To maintain viability, it is important to stratify the roles and responsibilities of those responsible for exercising the system to keep the qualification process meaningful and effective.

Recognize the signature to the right? If you don't, better get into those history books. If you do (and you should) you know that this, along with 55 other signatures served as the foundation of our Nation's Independence. Pretty high stakes rested on the power of a signature back then; although times have changed, a signature is still very powerful and needs to be respected...and protected.



It was the late 1990s and the Coast Guard Cutter community relied heavily on the U.S. Navy Professional Qualification Standards (PQS) to support the qualification of afloat personnel. These folks (including myself) spent countless hours researching and reading dozens of manuals and were left to our own devices to figure out if our efforts were proving valuable (or not). Another key component in the process was sitting down with the unit's most qualified personnel to glean their knowledge of the numerous shipboard systems, processes, and traditions; or as was the case most days, *trying* to get time with those unit Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to figure out what we needed to do or say to get, well, a signature! Some PQS tasks were simple, while others were complex and required an integral knowledge of the interplay of different systems before one could exhibit understanding, let alone proficiency in performance. Demonstrating to the Second Class Boatswain's Mate how to "make a mooring line off to a bit or cleat" was relatively easy: tell me, show me, let me do it, and done! The task "Safely moor a cutter to the pier" required a lot more complex knowledge, experience, and just plain time...did you know that every mooring evolution is unique, even if only by a little bit? No? Well neither did I when I first started, but over 16-years of experience led to it making perfect sense.

If only there was a way to make the tacit knowledge of our rotating cutter community accessible, standardized, and performance-based...to move the qualification system beyond the write-it-down and/or tell me, to an observable, criterion-based qualification system. Enter the Watch Qualification System (WQS), with the three-pronged strategy of:

Self Study of Supplied Material | Knowledge-based Testing | Demonstrated Ability to Perform

The success of these foundational elements is dependent upon alignment: alignment of expectations for those personnel breaking in (the novice); those personnel guiding (the journeyman); and those personnel observing and signing (the SMEs). They align to a common understanding of these three words which Webster's Dictionary defines:

- dem•on•strate** Describe or illustrate by practical application. Display, operate, and explain.
- a•bil•i•ty** A natural or acquired skill or talent.
- per•form•ance** Something performed: Accomplishment.

This alignment enables the novice to understand her/his role within the WQS program – to prepare self through rigorous study, inquiry, and testing. The individuals guiding are aligned to their role of support, and they will know the importance of the novice’s journey through the WQS program and provide the insight required to help the novice navigate the unfamiliar terrain. The SMEs are poised to provide final validation of the novice’s ability to apply their newly acquired skills within the appropriate operational context...the novice’s performance is evaluated through the eyes of the SME and a determination is made whether the performance was of a caliber to earn a performance sign-off. It all makes sense. It seems like it should operate with relative ease, and most of the time it does. However, when individuals approach and engage the process with the goal of “passing the test” and “getting a signature,” the true purpose of the system is undermined.

Given enough opportunities, most people can pass a multiple choice test. In the same light, given enough time and opportunity, most people can find someone who is authorized to sign off tasks and get a signature. Although these two activities are part of a viable qualification system, they serve as an integral means to a more purposeful end of “competency in task performance.” Over time, and given opportunity to exercise a certain competency, one will develop “proficiency in craft”; as experience builds and the internal body of knowledge becomes more robust, expertise in the form of mastery evolves. Like any structure, the strength of the building is only as good as its foundation. Without a strong foundation, the building will eventually give under the pressure and collapse. Human performance shares a similar structure to that of a building; a solid foundation establishes just how robust the building (or in this case the performance) can be. The following use case is fabricated to make a point; resemblance to an actual scenario is coincidental:

BM3 Simon reports aboard USCGC THOR, her first afloat assignment. As part of her qualification process, she needs to “demonstrate how to light off the AFFF system.” She knows that she needs to take a test, get a performance sign off and then demonstrate the procedures for someone. BM3 has break-in duty and the OOD is SK1 Gilligan. BM3 approaches SK1 and requests to perform the above mentioned task. SK1 responds, “Do you know how to light off the AFFF System?” BM3 thinks for a minute, “Yes, I passed the test and I talked through it with DC3.” SK1, who was on his way to conduct a round says, “Okay, DC3 is a pretty smart guy...where’s your sign-off book...there, done.”

What did you notice from the above scenario? Was task performance demonstrated? Is the SK1 the Subject Matter Expert on the AFFF System? True, as a qualified inport officer of the day, the SK1 needs to have a mastery of the ship and the many damage control systems, but is he the SME on installed ship systems? The SK1 assumed that since BM3 talked through it with DC3 knowledge transfer had occurred and performance was inevitable. Vicarious knowledge acquisition is not valid for a performance signature, and as a matter of thinking, I’m not sure vicarious knowledge acquisition is even an actual thing (hmm, maybe my next topic). If that were the case I would be a fantastic cosmetologist. Seems like a misplaced statement, so hear me out...my wife is a professional cosmetologist, we talk about all sorts of things having to do with hair, but look out if you walk into a salon and see me behind the chair--talk about a disaster waiting to happen! I’ve never demonstrated the ability to perform skill tasks in the field of cosmetology. The same goes for a performance sign-off. The best way to evaluate the performance of a task is to **observe** the individual **demonstrating the ability to perform** a task. I know it seems cut and dry right? Well, we are human and we are prone to helping people and

reducing the burden on ourselves. Seems selfish, but look at Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs (belongingness, love and esteem needs) all geared toward our individual happiness, contentment and eventual self-actualization. What better way to feel good about ourselves than “giving away” our signature to support someone else’s qualification process? You’ll feel WAY BETTER if that someone else **earned** that signature through--you guessed it-- **demonstrated ability to perform**.

How do we keep WQS a viable and meaningful methodology for achieving qualifications onboard our cutters? It is really simple:

Novice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect and support the qualification system; • The process is there to make you a more valuable member of the team; • Seek out the SME for your sign-offs; • Engage in learning “beyond the performance sign-off.”
Journeyman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect and support the qualification system; • You are integral to your shipmate’s success – guide them accordingly; • Avoid being selfish, don’t rush the qualification process to make your watch rotation better (remember their watch standing may save your life); • Use your interactions with the Novice to develop into the Expert.
Subject Matter Expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect and support the qualification system; • Be consistent and fair when providing your validation of task performance; • Ensure the novice is able to perform WITHOUT ASSISTANCE; • Respect and protect your signature...it is valuable and has meaning; • Understand the boundaries of your expertise...if you aren’t the one who should sign off a performance task DON’T...direct the novice to the right SME.

Think about your own qualification experiences...were you “given” a signature or did you “earn” it? Think about the signatures that you have provided. Were they “earned” or “given?” Self reflection is critical to truly understanding if you have contributed to the viability of the system or put the system at risk. Like other things that we experience in our personal and professional lives, “garbage in often equals, garbage out.” Set the bar high and build pride in those novices who aspire toward their various qualifications. Our collective stewardship is necessary to keep our qualification process meaningful and effective.

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